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Teaching in rural schools requires specialized preparation

Preparing teachers for careers

By Benedict J. Surwill

Montana is the fourth largest state in the nation, having an area of 147,138 square miles. The state is predominantly rural, with an estimated population of 760,000 people. Of the 56 counties within the state only six have a population density of 10 or more people per square mile. In the 1979-80 school year there were 104 one-teacher schools in the state. Furthermore, a large percentage of the school districts in Montana enroll less than 100 students. Education in Montana is definitely rural and worthy of the attention of teacher educators. However, like many teacher education institutions in rural areas Eastern Montana College does not provide programming specifically designed for teaching in isolated areas.

To determine if such programming might be needed I contacted rural school teachers and administrators in Montana to determine if they believed there was a need for developing teacher preparation programs designed specifically for rural schools.

The survey was conducted as a part of the continuous review process of our teacher preparation programs in the School of Education at Eastern Montana College. The method selected to carry out the survey began with telephone calls to rural school superintendents requesting their participation in answering a brief open response format questionnaire. In addition, permission was requested of the superintendents to meet personally

with their teachers and principals to explain the intent of the survey and to obtain their written comments to a second open response questionnaire. Total cooperation was obtained from all the superintendents, teachers, and principals contacted.

Superintendent Questionnaire

The following questions were asked of the rural superintendents:

1) In your estimation do the teacher education institutions prepare students to be effective teachers in rural schools, as compared with preparing them to take positions in urban school settings?

2) Are the teachers who are currently employed in your school system "generally" lacking any specific skills which in your estimation are important to being effective classroom teachers in 1980?

3) What can the teacher training institutions do to assist rural school administrators in staff development?

4) Is the Montana Office of Public Instruction helpful to rural school administrators and teachers? In what ways?

5) Which institutions and/or organizations do you find of value to you as a rural school superintendent? (example: Office of Public Instruction, colleges/universities, county agencies, etc.)

6) In what ways have you found them to be of value to you as superintendent?

Teacher Questionnaire

The second questionnaire was distributed to rural classroom teachers and school principals during on-site visitations. Again an open response format was employed in asking the following questions:

1) What general suggestions do you have for the design of our (Secondary/Elementary) teacher preparation program?

2) Is there a need for developing a special teacher preparation program for rural school teachers as compared to preparing teachers for metropolitan schools systems?

3) What specific suggestions do you have?

Recommendations from Rural Classroom Teachers and Administrators

1) Students preparing for a teaching career in rural schools should be required to master the skill of teaching in multi-grade classrooms. The majority of the respondents reported this to be the biggest void in regular teacher preparation programs.

2) Students need a strong background in the teaching of reading. The respondents were educated in a variety of institutions both in and out of the state and it was interesting to note that the majority indicated that they had received minimal preparation in teaching reading. They felt that this continues to be a definite weakness in teacher preparation programs today.

3) Elementary teachers in rural schools are commonly expected to teach art, music, health and physical education, library skills, and dramatics in addition to the three R's. Therefore, methods courses and early practicum experiences should be designed to provide adequate preparation in the arts and sciences as well as

the basic skills areas. Furthermore, students should be provided the opportunity to visit rural classrooms to observe teachers teaching these various subjects.

4) Secondary teachers preparing for careers in rural schools should realize that highly specialized training in only one academic discipline often restricts their marketability. In the great majority of rural schools it is imperative that teachers teach at least two academic disciplines and often carry additional assignments. One high school teacher in a school that enrolled less than 50 pupils reported that 95 percent of the training she received in her teacher training program prepared her to deal with five percent of her actual teaching responsibilities, mainly because her training prepared her **only** as a subject matter specialist. A teacher in another rural high school reported, "I teach Business Education, administer the guidance program, coach basketball and track, serve as Senior Class Advisor, and sponsor the National Honor Society." The range of responsibilities that goes along with a teaching contract in a rural school may well shock some students preparing to teach in a rural community.

5) Almost all of the respondents stated that students preparing for careers in rural schools need better training in handling classroom discipline with various age groups of children.

6) Students need specialized training in how to effectively use the resources in a rural community to enrich their classroom programs.

7) Students should be required to demonstrate how they would effectively plan a curriculum for a multi-grade level setting.

8) Students should be required to demonstrate their competency in diagnosing individual student needs and effectively planning programs to meet those needs.

9) Students should understand the sociological implications for a teacher living and teaching in a small rural community in contrast to living and teaching in a metropolitan community.

10) Students should be prepared to maintain a variety of school records including attendance records, test records, health records, equipment and supply records, and often county and state records.

Summary of recommendations

In many ways the responsibilities of a rural classroom teacher appear to be analogous with those of the traditional country doctor. Both may well be classified as specialists in "general practice." Like the circuit riding doctor, the professional training of rural teachers should prepare them to deal with a multiplicity of problems without depending on immediate specialized assistance. This would not be true for all rural classroom teachers in Montana since some rural schools cannot be distinguished in operation from urban schools except for their location. Teachers who teach in larger schools are generally considered somewhat specialized, i.e., first grade teachers, fourth grade teachers, sixth grade teachers, high school English teachers, high school mathematics teachers, etc. Therefore, they may need a more concentrated training program beamed at a specific grade level or subject area.

For the most part, however, rural schools are not financed well enough to be able to afford the level of

specialization more typical of urban schools. Thomas (1974: p 2) has shown that the administrative cost per pupil in school districts of up to 600 pupils are approximately twice that of districts with more than 25,000 pupils. In 1979, Muse reported that teachers in rural western high schools felt that their pre-service education did not adequately prepare them for the curriculum and poor facilities encountered in rural schools, and Edington and Musselman (1969) have reported that rural teachers tend not to have advanced degrees, are often poorly trained in curriculum and guidance principles and are unfamiliar with the unique problems of rural schools. Similar conditions prevail at the national level according to Estes, 1967. Such findings seem to support the need for preparation specific to teaching in isolated areas.

Students preparing to teach in rural schools should receive professional preparation **specifically designed** for this challenging career. This segment of their teacher preparation program should include on-campus and off-campus experiences designed specifically to meet the challenges of teaching in a rural school. In addition to the special rural teaching preparation rural teachers also need, as do all teachers, certain generic competencies. For example, teachers should be knowledgeable in the area of learning theories, so that they are well qualified to promote a productive learning environment for their students. Subsequently a learning oriented classroom environment presupposes a host of other competencies such as the teacher's ability to maintain discipline, to motivate students, to apply appropriate evaluative techniques and to teach academic content skillfully.

Designing a special track in the regular teacher education program for students preparing to teach in rural schools

As previously suggested isolated, rural teachers are typically faced with special job responsibilities. Teacher educators should be aware of this and take the steps necessary to meet the professional training needs of students preparing for rural schools. The recommendations that came from the rural teachers, principals and superintendents, appear to substantiate this claim.

Therefore, I offer the following programmatic suggestions, which may be included in any teacher preparation program, as a means of responding to the particular needs of students preparing for teaching careers in rural schools.

First a "methods" course in rural school teaching should be developed. This course should be designed to provide students with a variety of experiences relating to the effective presentation of academic subject matter in a multi-grade setting. The course should include observation of rural school teachers in action, along with laboratory and clinical experiences both on and off campus. Ideally the course should be team taught by college faculty in consultation with rural classroom teachers.

Secondly, a course in rural educational sociology should be developed. This course should provide an overview of the sociological implications for teachers living and working in rural communities. It would be highly desirable to include guest speakers from rural communities as a part of this class.

A third cause in developing effective school-community relations should also be included. This course should provide students with the knowledge and skills

necessary to effectively use the community as resource for enriching the program. Rural teachers, administrators, board members, business representatives, social and service organization representatives, should be recruited as resources for the class.

In addition to these three rural oriented foundation courses experiences to relate theory to practice should also be provided. Students should be provided these experiences in rural school settings preceded by specially designed on-campus clinical experiences. Students should be given the opportunity to observe and participate in teaching activities in a rural classroom environment. The on-campus clinical experiences should involve the student in the diagnosis and treatment of teaching problems under simulated conditions.

Finally, students preparing for a career in rural education should certainly be assigned to student teach in a rural school.

Summary

The sampling of rural teachers and administrators in this Montana survey points toward the need for a specialized training program for rural teaching and teacher preparation institutions would be responding by designing programs to meet the professional needs of rural educators.

It is suggested that the design must include consideration of the sociology of rural areas as well as preparation to function in relative isolation.

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